(Lemhi Forest Restoration Group Comments on the Phelan-Sharkey Project, Provided Dec. 3, 2015)

Phelan Sharkey Farm Bill Project - DRAFT Purpose & Need Statement

The Phelan-Sharkey Project Area is located in Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) designated by the 2011 Lemhi County Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). This project contributes to the Final Phase in the Development of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy (USDA and USDI 2014) that defines three national goals that include resilient landscapes, fire adapted communities, and safe and effective wildfire response. The purpose of the Phelan-Sharkey Project is to manage forest structure and species composition to improve forest landscape resiliency to recover from uncharacteristic insect and disease disturbance and resulting uncharacteristic wildfire. Within the Project Area there is a need to increase resilience to a variety of forest insect and disease agents, to treat fuels which would help to reduce the potential negative impacts of a large wildfire in the Salmon Municipal Watershed, and to create a defensible corridor which would improve firefighter and public safety. There is also a need to reduce the large accumulation of dead and dying hazardous fuels especially those associated with recent epidemics of bark beetles, western spruce budworm and endemic dwarf mistletoe.

Both within and outside the Project Area, years of fire exclusion has created a disparity in fire intervals today when compared to historical fire intervals. This has resulted in fuel build up and an increased potential for uncharacteristic wildfire and insect and disease outbreaks. The increased fuel build up in stands is often directly related to uncharacteristic fire behavior due to increased ground fuels, ladder fuels and dead aerial fuels. Reducing stand density and the abundance of host tree species will help to increase landscape resiliency to a wide range of insect and disease agents and uncharacteristic fire disturbance.

Tree species diversity within the project area includes lodgepole pine, douglas fir, subalpine fir, Engleman spruce, and whitebark pine. Inter-tree competition in combination with whitebark pine blister rust has resulted in increased stress on whitebark pine and other species which has contributed to susceptibility to mountain pine beetle. Mountain pine beetle outbreaks in lodgepole pine stands can affect large areas and individual stands when generally the average age is greater than 80 years, tree diameters are greater than 8 inches, higher stand stocking levels exist, percent of host trees is high, and there are favorable conditions for beetle survival (USDA 2009). Douglas-fir beetle require similar stand characteristics with some species specific differences such as but not limited to generally larger host trees for successful brood rearing *(USDA)*. Within the Project Area, the most common host trees of western spruce budworm include Douglas-fir, subalpine fir, and Engelmann spruce; however, whitebark pine and lodgepole pine are also suitable host trees (USDA 1986). Western spruce budworm can affect large areas and individual stands when generally the site productivity is low, canopy cover is high, stand structure is multi-storied, and the percent of host trees is high (USDA).

Draft Proposed Action:

It is anticipated that a variety of treatments would be utilized to treat the 3,000 acre project area. The silvicultural treatments to be utilized would include commercial harvest, non-commercial thinning, shaded fuel breaks, hand piling and prescribed fire. Commercial harvest methods would include ground and cable based systems. It is also anticipated that the construction and/or use of temporary roads would occur within the project area. When possible, temporary roads would utilize existing unauthorized roads or skid trail corridors which already exist. All temporary roads would be decommissioned upon completion of the project or expiration of the contract per 36 CFR 294. Maintenance on access roads could include blading, ditch and culvert maintenance/improvements, spot surfacing and brushing. It is anticipated that this project would be completed within 10 years of the signed decision. All temporary roads would be decommissioned within 3 years following completion of project activities.